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# ✿ (</subscribe/digital/>) Smart Communications Contract Reveals Plans for Expanding Privatized Prison Mail

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by Kevin Bliss

The Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC) has been negotiating with a newly organized company called Smart Communications (SC), per a March 24, 2021 article in *Vice*. Built by CEO Jon Logan, the company's purpose is to take over the handling of all state or federal prisoners' mail, ensuring 100% prevention of incoming contraband and creating a database that will track not only all aspects of the prisoners' correspondence, but never-before-collected personal information of the senders as well. A side benefit for Logan of course is being able to monetize this form of human communication and profiting handsomely from prisoners' contact with the outside world. Civil rights advocates are concerned about the degree of privacy invasion this incurs on the prisoners' families and friends in addition to the potential for abuse.

In 2016, Logan came up with an idea to centralize and automate a prison's mail collection system which he called Mailguard. A prisoner's mail is sent to a P.O. box, which then forwards that mail to SC's processing hub in Tampa, Florida where it is sorted, photocopied, and downloaded into a computer. Mail can then be routed as a PDF to a prisoner's tablet, a kiosk, or sent to a prisoner in photocopied form. The original is shredded and a hardcopy is kept on file for 30 days.

SC keeps a database of all the mail sent or received by a prisoner. The sender's personal information is cataloged into that same database without the sender's foreknowledge. "Investigators will have access to the postal mail sender's email address, physical address, IP Address, mobile cell number, GEO GPS location tracking, exact devices used when accessing system [sic], any related accounts the sender may also make or use," stated a proposal prepared by SC for the VDOC. "[The system] eliminates anonymity of postal mail, now postal mail has a digital fingerprint with new intelligence," which, it was stated, could be used to crack down on "gang members."

Pennsylvania signed a contract with SC after a purported influx of mail being delivered laced with synthetic marijuana dictated the state call for an emergency procurement process, which seems to have been an effort to sidestep normal procurement procedures. Staff Attorney for Pittsburgh-based Abolitionist Law Center, Quinn Cozzens, said the rollout was a disaster.

"Mail was delayed for weeks or months and was regularly delivered to the wrong person. Color photos were scanned and delivered in black and white, often with portions of the picture cut off," he stated. "They rejected mail and returned it to the sender without explanation for why it was rejected."

Recently, the VDOC contacted SC to see if the company could help close a loophole that allowed businesses to be able to send color photos to prisoners. SC came back with a reply that stated they could manage the VDOC's entire mail processing system, guaranteeing 100% contraband elimination

introduced through the mail and saving the VDOC between \$4 million and \$13 million in the first five years.

SC insisted that the Mailguard proposal sent to the VDOC in response to their initial request was confidential material and protected as trade secrets. When it was discovered that the government watchdog organization, *Vice.com*'s Motherboard, obtained a copy of the proposal and posted it on its nonprofit platform, Muckrock, SC stated that it was a violation of their proprietary intellectual property and demanded that Motherboard desist from publishing this proposal. The VDOC states that it sought specific services from SC and did not enter into a nondisclosure agreement concerning this proposal. Therefore, when compelled by a Freedom of Information request Motherboard submitted to reveal how taxpayers' dollars were being spent by the VDOC, a copy of the proposal was forwarded to Motherboard.

"Smart Communications has been boasting of their dystopian surveillance system at least since they were awarded a contract by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections in 2018," stated Cozzens. "Smart Communications' total surveillance of every aspect of communications with incarcerated people is a chilling convergence of the expansion and privatization of the surveillance state on one hand, and a growing private industry that profits from holding human beings in cages on the other."

SC's proposal stated that its Mailguard system would eliminate 90% of labor and staff involvement with prisoner mail. SC's Smart Tracker system would allow senders to track the status of their mail at any time. They will be automatically notified upon receipt of the mail at the professional hub as well as whether the mail is to be rejected or not and any reasoning for its rejection. Prison investigators would receive real-time texts the moment a known gang member in the prison received mail.

Prisoners could also be given "read notification rights," which would allow them to track the status of their mail similar to that of the sender. Upon release, prisoners would have 30 days to log into the system so they could download and print all copies of their mail received while in prison.

SC's proposal stated they estimated that the VDOC currently employed 70 to 100 personnel to process the state prisons' incoming mail. Salaries cost the VDOC \$3 to \$5 million annually. Each prison required its own mail processing and equipment and maintenance, bringing the total annual cost to be between \$4 and \$6 million. The proposal quoted an annual cost of \$3,072,000. The proposal also said that the VDOC would no longer be paying ancillary costs to process mail, carrying any risk of health hazard to VDOC mail processing personnel, or creating any lost time to VDOC employees for mail processing. SC's proposal required the VDOC to sign a five-year contract totaling \$15,360,000.

Civil rights activists are concerned due to the degree of intrusive privacy invasion. Every family member, friend, known associate, business, religious organization, social service group, and more will be collectively monitored without regard to criminal intent simply for corresponding with someone in prison. "People who communicate with prisoners are now going to have reduced autonomy, privacy and expression and associational rights," said Electronic Frontier Foundation Senior Staff Attorney Aaron Mackey, "because now, wholly innocent individuals who are trying to just communicate with family and loved ones, members of their community and so on, are now going to be caught up in this surveillance."

Cozzens said the system prevented prisoners from holding the physical embodiment of a child's love in the form of a drawing, collecting actual photos of family and friends for preservation, or holding on to a treasured handwritten letter from a dear loved one. "There is quite a difference between a prison

guard potentially skimming over a letter one time before delivering it,” he said, “and every person who sends mail to an incarcerated person having their letters scanned, rendered digitally searchable, stored for seven years, and on top of that their personal information is also stored and meticulously tracked.” He likened it to police recording a license plate during a routine traffic stop and the mass deployment of automatic license plate readers within a neighborhood. Just another step in the ongoing expansion of the American police state where its citizenry is constantly surveilled and caged. One contract at a time.

Source: *vice.com*

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